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Portrait of a climate change activist, still a young girl

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Body

You could make an entire movie about Greta Thunberg sailing across the Atlantic. The trans-oceanic voyage from the old world to the new was once a dangerous and uncomfortable undertaking, before becoming routine and even opulent in the last century and then, with the advent of air travel, rare and frightening once more.

Thunberg made the trip in 2019 to avoid the charge of hypocrisy - why talk about saving the planet if you're going to travel by jet to do it? - but also to show that it was both possible and yet, for most travellers, unthinkable. It's just one small chapter in Nathan Grossman's new documentary, which traces the path of the teenage ***climate*** change activist from a solitary strike outside the Swedish parliament in 2018, to meeting world leaders and speaking before crowds of thousands.

It's inspiring stuff, but also a little sad. As Thunberg herself says in a speech near the end of the film's 97 minutes, in a better world she would be at home in Sweden, not trying to make the world better. Watching her deal with doubts and detractors - how many of us have to deal with personal attacks from both Putin and Trump? - you sense what a thankless task she's chosen to perform.

I Am Greta is a portrait of a person rather than an environmental documentary. There are very few facts and figures about ***climate*** change, and what we do get is a touch glib, such as the opening montage of statements of denial over images of environmental destruction; one could easily put together an opposing mosaic of declarations of ***doom*** next to scenes of tranquility. And so, like a lot of non-fiction filmmaking in these polarized times, it's unlikely to change many minds.

What it will do is fill in some of the blanks in Thunberg's life for those who may know her as a passing Instagram image or nightly new clip. We meet her well-meaning parents, and learn about living with Asperger's syndrome, though she corrects a reporter who asks if she "suffers from it."

The film also notes that it was a film shown to Thunberg's classroom - emaciated polar bears and the like - that first alerted her to the issue of ***climate*** change. Her initial reaction was to sink into a depression and stop eating. It was only later that she roused herself to try to make a difference, starting with a "school strike for ***climate***" in 2018 that eventually grew into a worldwide movement.

It's been a whirlwind movement as well. Within the space of a year, Thunberg met a dizzying succession of leaders including Emmanuel Macron, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Pope Francis. Several times she remarks that her life feels like a movie, a dream or a role-playing game, with everyone saying the right things at the right time, and nothing changing. It's no wonder her later speeches start to sound scornful and scolding.

The film also ably demonstrates the paradox of being famous for activism. When a reporter tells the young speaker that the huge crowd waiting are "here for you," she replies evenly: "No. They're here for themselves. And for everyone."

I Am Greta opens on Oct. 16 across Canada.

3 stars out of 5 !@COPYRIGHT=© 2020 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

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